



The Mother Tragedy of the Lonesome Lighthouse

How the Isolation of Conimicut Drove to Madness and Self-Destruction the

Keeper's Wife Who Loved the Sea and Then Hated It When the Charm of Its Solitude Had Faded.

The Ruthless Spell of the Sea

At first she was fascinated, just as she had thought she would be. She had always been a lover of the sea. It was pleasant to sit in a warm, cozy room and look out at the water. She liked to see the gulls flapping around, to see the masts of sailing vessels far out, to see the great light that started from over her head and whipped through the purple waters.

But after a while a sort of stealthy unfriendliness crept into this scene. She began to think it would be a relief to her if she could forget it for a while. But she couldn't forget it. It was ever before her. By day she saw it in all directions. By night she heard it pounding and hissing on the shore.

Of course, her husband was there and her two children. But as time went on even they were unable to save her from the spell of the sea.

TO the toll of the insatiable sea is added the lives of Mrs. Ellsworth Smith and her baby son Russell of Narragansett Bay. But Mrs. Smith was not one of those who went down to the sea in ships. The sea came to her as she sat in her lonely tower at its edge and watched for hour after hour and day after day the ceaseless heave of its bosom.

The sea didn't destroy her in one mad burst of fury. It slowly chilled her heart, slowly wore down her will to live. It seemed to Mrs. Smith, as she looked out her tower window, that every living thing had gone from the earth except this tossing monster that stretched out before her. So one day she fed poison to her children and took a dose herself. She couldn't endure the awful loneliness any longer.

A little while later her husband buried her and the baby in a grave near East Greenwich, R. I. He took her away from sound of the sea. He wanted her to rest in peace. The 5-year-old son, Robert Smith, recovered from the poison.

Nellie Smith was inland born and bred but she had always had romantic notions about the sea. So when her husband, Capt. Ellsworth Smith, became keeper of Conimicut Light he viewed the prospect with enthusiasm. She thought it would be wonderful to breathe the fresh sea air, to watch the dancing whitecaps and the breakers, to see the huge white steamers bearing into port. She had heard people who had been on ocean trips declare they could watch the sea all day long and never tire.

When He Returned from Shore

Then she had been separated from her husband for long periods when he was at sea. This new home would insure their being together. It would also provide a healthful, vigorous atmosphere in which her children might grow up. Altogether, Nellie Smith went to Conimicut Lighthouse believing that she was entering upon a period of idyllic peace and joy.

She lasted for three months.

Afterward, the surviving boy, Robert, told his father some of the things his mother had said. This, together with a few of her remarks she had made on her two visits to shore, revealed the tragic story of the Lonely Lighthouse.

One day Capt. Smith left the lighthouse about 10 o'clock in the morning.

"I was going to Conimicut Village for provisions," he said. "When I left, Nellie seemed to be happy. She was playing with the children. She kissed me good-by and waved to me as I steered for the shore."

"I came back at 4 P. M. with a boatload of food. I hailed and got no answer. When I mounted the steps I took my time. How could I know what I was to find? And I came into the kitchen with two armloads. I saw Robert, the 5-year-old boy, sitting on the table. He was pale. He was very sick."

"Nellie sat beside him. Her head was on her arms. I walked up and spoke to her, with my arms still full. Robert was too sick to talk. I spoke sharply to Nellie, thinking to rouse her, and when I couldn't I laid down the things and shook her shoulder. When she leaned further over I lifted her arm. It dropped like lead. She was dead."

Tragic Lighthouse Loneliness

"I went upstairs. Something told me what had happened. I saw Russell lying on the bed. He, too, was dead."

"I then took Robert, put him in the dory and rowed back as hard as I could to Conimicut. Robert sat in the stern against the tiller. I rushed him to a doctor, who gave him an antidote. Robert came around. . . . Their mother had fed them bichloride of mercury. She gave it to Robert and Russell, telling them it was candy."

Little Robert, not fully appreciating what had happened, finished the story.

"Mamma said, 'Here Robert. It's candy.' I took the little round thing and tasted it and it was bitter. But when I went to spit it out, mamma said: 'No, it will be sweeter soon.' So I ate it then and then I thought I would like to have more if it would be sweeter soon and at ten or eleven or a hundred."

"Then mamma held Russell on her lap. And she gave him these little round things. And

Russell tried to spit them out. But she told him it was candy. And she ate some herself and carried Russell upstairs to bed. Then she came down to me. But I was awful sick. Mamma sat on the chair and put her head down. And then Dad came. Then was when Mamma and Russell started looking sick."

The light still flares from Conimicut tower. It has never failed. Capt. Smith, with the assistance only of his 5-year-old son, is still on duty. And if he never knew it before, he knows now what it is to get lonely.



Conimicut Lighthouse, Where the Loneliness of the Sea Caused Mrs. Ellsworth to Poison Herself and Both Her Little Boys. One Child Survived.

The lighthouse has always been a high point of tragedy and romance in fiction and in fact.

In "Out of the Fog," a photoplay starring Mme. Nazimova, something of that terror and loneliness which the sea must have thrown about Mrs. Ellsworth Smith, is pictured. The screen version which was made from the stage play, "Ception Shoals," has as its tragic heroine a girl who had been condemned to spend a life of exile in a lighthouse. Constant brooding over her fate and the bitter loneliness of her life finally drives her to suicide.

Prominent among the lighthouse romances of history is the story of Grace Darling. From her high tower she saw the wreckage of the ill-fated "Forfarshire" and braving the storm she rowed

out to the vessel and rescued several of the sailors.

The fortitude of the wife of the keeper of Kerdens Light, off Scotland, takes rank along with this. According to this story, the keeper suddenly became ill while he was cleaning the lantern. His wife left her two children, put her husband to bed, mounted to the tower and completed polishing the lantern.

After lighting the lantern she discovered that the light was not turning. So the wife remained in the tower all night, turning the light with her hands. At sunrise she returned to her husband's living compartment and found him dead.

Even more harrowing is the story associated with Smalls Light on the coast of England.

Two keepers were attending this light and one

The Frenzy of the Lonely Woman of the Lighthouse, as Portrayed by Mme. Nazimova in "Out of the Fog."

of them died suddenly. Smalls Light is a desolate, isolated place. There was no help nearby—nobody within reach. And relief ships visited the place but once every three months. The surviving keeper feared he might be accused of foul play. So he stood the corpse up beside the lantern tower on the balcony, hoping that the unusual sight might attract a passing vessel.

When help finally came, several weeks later, the crew of the rescuing vessel found the corpse, badly emaciated, still standing there. The surviving keeper had gone insane.

From Bird Rock Light in Nova Scotia comes still another tale of horror.

One day the keeper fell into the sea from the little balcony surrounding the light. His wife heard his cries and saw him struggling in the waters that dashed among the jagged rocks below. She threw him a life preserver, but the force of the waves was such that he was beaten to pieces before her eyes.

For ten days afterward this woman kept the light in order, and blew her foghorn, hoping that someone would hear and come to her rescue. When help finally did come, however, her mind was gone. A little baby in the lighthouse was found slowly starving to death. The mother had had to watch the light so closely that she neglected the child.

Realizing the intense loneliness suffered by lighthouse keepers, U. S. Commissioner of Lighthouses George R. Putnam has fathered a movement to install radio phones in all lighthouses so that the desolation may be mitigated by radio concerts. Some of the remote Alaska lighthouses already have them. The Commissioner wants to relieve particularly the conditions in the lighthouses at the entrance to Bering Sea, where the keepers have to remain three years at a time. Tillamook Rock Light, on the Pacific Coast, will also get radio equipment in a short time. Bad weather has frequently prevented occupants of this lighthouse from communicating with the coast for as long as seven weeks at a time.



Five-Year-Old Robert, Who Recovered.